

Are Portuguese School Libraries Providing Access to Information for Everyone? – The Case of 20 Selected Ones

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Abstract

This paper aims at describing the today's reality of 20 school libraries (SL) belonging to



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ongoing activities.

This paper is based on the field notes analysis and non-participant direct observation that took place at 20 SL during November and December 2006 and January 2007. This was the 2nd phase, out of four, of a PhD program research for which was adopted a qualitative methodology both for data gathering and analysis techniques. In this sense, the majority of data were obtained through semi-structured interviews and field notes taken during about 4 hours of non participant direct observation to selected respondents.

By the end of this research phase it was found that the most significant element in bring about improvements was the commitment and support of the school's management board. Nevertheless, school libraries with more students coming in, more activities, larger and catalogued/classified book stock, more equipment and with better physical space, have team members with adequate training for the development of their tasks and roles.

Recommendations/suggestions are given both to school management boards and the ones responsible for the development of school libraries in schools, the RBE and the regional education authorities, aiming at placing school libraries on the top educational priorities, therefore recognizing them as an important point of access to information for everyone.

Introduction

The Portuguese school libraries network (RBE) has commemorated its 10th anniversary in 2006. Started back in 1996/1997 academic year, this network was essential for Portuguese school libraries (SL) existence, organization and development. The RBE program was able to equip till November 2007, 1880 school libraries with technological infra-structures aiming at satisfying information needs of its educational community and turning them into spaces where students learn how to learn and inform themselves continuously through out their lives. This program's other objective was the training of human resources allocated to SL. However, this objective has not yet been fully accomplished, as there is still a limited number of teachers with specific training to perform their duties in the SL and a third of the teams responsible for these libraries' do not have a single teacher with specific training (Novo, 2006).

Methodology

This research work, belonging to a PhD program, is focused on SL of Portuguese basic integrated schools (EBIs), which were till 2005 already in the RBE. This research makes use of qualitative methodology either for data gathering and analysis techniques. Qualitative methodologies have been frequently referred (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994) as being particularly suitable for library and information studies research. Therefore, the majority of data was obtained through semi-structured interviews and field notes resulting from non-participant direct observation to selected respondents. Field notes have, most of the times, descriptive parts and reflection parts.

Descriptive parts are as much specific as possible and include subjects' pictures, dialogue's reconstruction, space's descriptions, particular facts' reports, description of activities and observer's behaviour. On the other hand, reflection parts are, in their majority, speculations and include reflections about the analysis, conflicts and dilemmas, the observer's point of view and facts needing some clarification.



Map 1 - Portugal regional educational authorities.

This research work is divided into several phases. In the first one (concluded), questionnaires were sent, by mail, to the teachers responsible for the 57 SL of EBIs, belonging to the RBE till 2005. This questionnaire was asking for factual information on human resources and equipment. The analysis of the 41 returned completed questionnaires (72 %), allowed, in a second phase (also concluded), the selection of 20 SL following the maximum diversity criteria: teacher / team specific training, SL characteristics, EBI's characteristics and geographical location.

The selected schools were:

- 3 schools belonging to north regional educational authority (DREN)
- 4 schools belonging to centre regional educational authority (DREC)
- 7 schools belonging to Lisbon regional educational authority (DREL)
- 4 schools belonging to Alentejo regional educational authority (DREA)
- 2 schools belonging to Algarve regional educational authority (DREALG)

In these schools, during November and December 2006 and January 2007, the fieldwork was developed with semi-structured interviews, non-participant direct observation and field notes taken while and after observation was taking place, which took on average 4 hours. This paper results from the field notes analysis.

Factors that can make a difference

After visiting, observing and talking to various people from the 20 EBIs, one can conclude that there are mainly two factors which contribute/constrain the normal day-to-day running, development and growing of SL: the management school board and the specific training for SL duties of the teacher, head of the team responsible for the SL, most commonly referred to as the coordinator. Nevertheless, his/her characteristics, like personality and dedication, cannot be underestimated.

The degree of importance that the management school board, mainly its President or Vice-president, of each one of the schools visited, give to the SL, can be vital for its day-to-day running, both in terms of financing (book collection, IT and physical spaces/location) and relationship with the responsible team. Completely different and even opposite situations were observed throughout the five regional educational authorities (DREs). Ten schools can be considered 'positive' and the following are good examples that illustrate the school management board support towards the library:

- At school N3, the SL is very important to the President and he sees it as the school face. The Book Fair, which is organised by the coordinator and takes place in the SL, is a big cultural and social event for the involving community. The President makes institutional invitations and the town hall President, his city cultural councillor and other personalities come to the opening of the Fair, which happens always on the 1st of November, national holy day. The school management board President gives a lot of autonomy and support to the coordinator both in terms of budget control and human resources. As she says "It is me who decide most of things without needing to ask for permission. Enough human and materials' resources, as well as money, have been given to me and this has allowed to do what ever I want the way I want".
- At school G3, the President considers the SL a very important resource and as he said, "With the prejudice of other school services, I keep three full time library assistants. It is a great effort but it is more than justifiable."

Five 'negative' schools were found, being three of them almost ignored by the school management board:

- At school N5, the coordinator said she does not have any kind of support neither from the Board or the other school teachers. As she said "It was allocated to the SL a very small amount of money and almost any human resources. I can not count on any library assistants' time and my timetable does not coincide with any of the other team members". This coordinator is very disappointed with the lack of working conditions and she already announced that she is not willing to perform SL duties the following academic year.

- The A5 coordinator feels that neither the school management nor the pedagogical board's, see the SL as an important resource for students. As she said, "They forgot to convoke me for the last pedagogical board during which the SL Activities' Plan would be approved."
- The L9 school management board does not give any support to the SL neither in terms of materials and finances nor in terms of human resources. The book stock, made of around 7,000 materials (books, DVDs, CD-ROMs, periodicals, etc.) is not yet classified, the three existing computers are long ago out of order and there is no printer or photocopier machine. "There is no money for buying books or getting the computers working", said the coordinator. During the four hours of observation, no one has come in to the SL, being students, teachers or any school admin staff.

School Library for whom?

Students, followed by teachers and then by the school community as a whole, are the target group for the majority of SL coordinators. It was for this target group that the book collection was selected, to whom activities are addressed and for whom there is so much work and dedication a lot of hours per week. At least this is what the majority says or would like to be able to do. The reality found across the 20 schools is very diverse and completely different situations were observed. The majority of these schools are inside rural environments, with a lot of needs and very low socio-cultural levels, where students do not have great expectations and only go to school because it is mandatory. In none of these schools there is a students' common room and quite a large number of students, especially with bad weather, use the SL as a living room. Therefore, behaviour rules in a library are difficult to establish and impose because for the majority of these students, SL are their places to meet and talk with friends. Eleven, out of twenty of the visited SL, are noisy places, where confusion is installed and where SL teams some times are not able to and others do not make any effort to establish order and quietness.

In one of the SL, and due to 'student's lack of good manners', according to the coordinator, the SL team made a poster with the 'magic words': "Good morning; Good afternoon; I want to check out this book; My SL number is...; See you later; See you tomorrow; Thank you." These habits did not exist in students and according to the coordinator there is already some improvement.

The access to SL by students, in terms of their opening hours, sometimes is not suitable to certain school populations that depend on these resources to have access to information either through computers and the internet (one of the main reasons for going to the SL), or newspapers and magazines or even books and audio-visual material. It is at lunchtime and during breaks that students have more opportunities to go to SL but they are closed during these two periods in nine out of twenty visited schools. SL are closed at these more crowded times due to shortage of human resources (teachers or library assistants) that could keep it open. Most of the times library assistants are needed at corridors, at other school services or even at another school belonging to the same group of schools.

In average, SL are open 36h 30m per week and students and teachers are the ones who use it more often. Students between the ages of 5 and 12 are who usually go to SL and use them as a resource of information. In general, older students were not seen at any of the SL visited.

Three schools stand out in terms of number of students going to their SL:

- School L9 was the most 'negative' one because during the 3h 30m of observation no student, teacher or admin school staff has come in. Seventy per cent of the school

population is African and speak dialects between them. “If they do not speak Portuguese they are not able to read in Portuguese. The social-cultural environment they have at home does not provide any study incentives and for this reason it is very difficult to motivate them to read or to come to the SL”, said the coordinator.

- School A6 is a very ‘positive’ example: it is open 40h per week for the whole school community; there is an average of 90 students during lunch time and some times there is the need to close the door as it is already too crowded. A poster by the SL entrance speaks for itself “Academic achievement can be built up”.
- School G3 is also open 40h per week and more than 200 students go there every day. During International School Library Day (ISLD) almost 500 students have been to the SL, which is a very positive fact acknowledged by the coordinator.

On the whole, school admin staff was not referred by the coordinators, or even been observed, as a group that uses the SL. On the contrary, some teachers, parents or other community members go there and use its resources and IT. The example of A6 school illustrates this very well: a great part of its community is made of German, Dutch and Ukrainian people, who go to the SL in the evenings to get Portuguese classes. Also its teachers are heavy users, get resources to their classes, research on the Internet and help students with their own projects.

School Library with whom?

“The organization and management of the school library is performed by an educational team with competencies in pedagogy, project management, information and library studies management, which should not exceed the limit of four teachers, including the coordinator” (Organization of the Academic Year 2007/2008, Portuguese Ministry of Education, 17th July 2007).

The teams responsible for the day-to-day running and organization of SL are very different in kind and even inside each one of them: twelve out of twenty have a coordinator with some specific training, being two of these post-graduate students in Library and Information Studies. In eight SL, library assistants are the ones with training (very diverse both in quality and quantity) and work full time, being this way responsible for the SL day-to-day running and organization but, surprisingly, not considered as being part of the team. In other SL, the team cannot count on any library assistants’ support and the opening and running of them depend exclusively on the hours allocated to teachers as happens at N1 and N5 schools. In these two cases, the serious lack of human resources and support from the RBE are the two big problems they have been facing. At school N5, “Coordinators have been staying only for one year and then they go; there is any kind of continuity in the tasks and activities, only keeping the door open when that is feasible” in the words of the coordinator.

There are four SL that are good examples in terms of quantity and “quality” of their teams:

- Schools A6 and G3 are ‘positive’ examples:
 - At school A6 there is a full time library assistant for the last 4 years who have already 32 training courses in the area of school librarianship;
 - School G3 has three full time library assistants and all have had specific training to perform their tasks in the SL; its coordinator, who also has specific qualifications, give a lot of her time to the SL, is very dynamic and as she says “super in love with libraries”.
- Schools L3 and G1 are more ‘negative’:
 - At school L3, whose coordinator does not have any kind of training to perform her duties, students reacted badly when they were forced to leave the SL because it was coordinator’s lunch time and there was no one else to come in

and be in charge. Students were very disappointed and complaining with that situation and even saying that they wouldn't return there.

- G1 school is placed in a small village, in the middle of a mountain, where there are no daily newspapers. It is a very small school with just one class per schooling level and a group of teachers that changes every year. This situation implies changing SL team yearly and currently, neither the coordinator nor the library assistant have any kind of specific training.

The involvement of students on activities needed to run a SL was only seen at school C4. This is not a common practice at least at the SL visited but was nevertheless referred by some coordinators as something worthwhile considering.

School Libraries' physical spaces

There are some differences in terms of location and furniture in all the SL visited and observed: fourteen are placed on the first floor and the other on the ground floor. On the whole, they all are friendly and wide spaces, allowing an easy distribution of furniture, painted with bright colours, with good natural lightning and well-defined functional areas: periodical reading, reference area, reading room, IT area and special places for younger students. It was only at four SL that the information/library desk was wrongly placed as it was not possible to have a general view from there, with special attention to computer screens and some reading room tables that were behind shelves. They all have lockers for students and only two have a storage room and working rooms for teams, both referred by all coordinators as crucial and vital spaces for 'back stage' work.

The furniture of seventeen SL is modern, all alike, with adequate shape and size both for tables, chairs, shelves and exhibition stands. The other three SL (L4, L11 and A7) have inappropriate and little library furniture, being the majority closets with two shelves on the top and doors underneath, not at all feasible in open access collections and free access to information.

It was observed, in two different situations, the usage of SL for activities other than pedagogical ones, with special reference to 'punishment':

- It was L2 school's management board President, who took to the SL an entire class of thirteen students giving them twenty minutes to write about what had happen that made all of them being called to the school board.
- At A7 and after all the other students had gone to their classes, one student stayed at the SL to write twenty times a text of six lines about his misbehaviour. At that time, the coordinator said that all members of the pedagogical school board had approved such a procedure.

Similarly to other aspects already described, it was also possible to find SL that are clearly more positive examples than others in what relates to their physical spaces. Especially N3 and L9 schools are respectively 'positive' and 'negative' situations:

- SL N3 is located on the 1st first floor and has a very nice environment: it has been recently painted, with the advice of an interior designer regarding its colours; all its furniture is new and made especially to fit in there so the space available could be fully used;
- SL L9 is located on the ground floor in a dark space with little natural light. Besides being a large place is extremely difficult to arrange and dispose shelves, tables and

chairs because is a very irregular space, with several corners that are not visible from the information/lending desk.

School Library Collection and Equipment

Books and other materials

All the procedures involved in having the books and other material ready on the shelves for lending, starting with their acquisition, cataloguing, classifying, indexing and putting all this information available in an OPAC, differ from school to school.

There are no two SL collections alike and in all of them, with no exception, it is only possible an estimation of their contents in terms of quantity. The following intervals were found either by going to the shelves and make an estimation or by information that coordinators or library assistants could provide:

- Books – between 2,500 and 7,000;
- Magazines and newspapers – between none and 8;
- Non book material:
 - Audio-cassettes – between 30 and 300;
 - CD-ROM – between 30 and 300;
 - DVDs – between 6 and 100;
 - VHS cassettes – between 20 and 360;
 - Pedagogical games – between 50 and 220.

The coordinators usually do the selection of all the collection and in some SL he/she tries to get other teachers collaboration through the suggestion of titles. The *Portuguese Reading National Plan*, started in 2006, gave an additional help in terms of lists of books that SL should have for loan in sufficient number. Nevertheless, this sometimes has created additional pressure on some coordinators as they have been facing difficulties in getting those titles in time from the publishers.

It is usually the team member, being a teacher or a library assistant, who has some training on cataloguing, classifying and indexing, the one responsible for organizing the whole SL collection. However, when there is no one with such capabilities, the material is simply shelved, even without being registered. The worst case found was at N5 where is it already two years since someone was taking care of all these procedures because here they have been facing serious human resources problems. At SL with proper human resources and enough time and training, the most common scenery found is where nearly two thirds of the collection is catalogued and classified.

All twenty SL make book and other material loans to students and in all of them this is still a manual process. Only at N5 was found some loan restrictions to first years' students due to the fact of several library books being found at school corridors and play yards. The coordinator has proposed visits to the SL by these students with their teachers but that did not yet had happen. As a consequence, there has not been any promotion or incentives to reading habits, that are considered crucial for these school level children by the Portuguese national reading plan (Plano Nacional de Leitura, 2006) and access to information has not been available to these students.

It was not found in any SL a systematic gathering of information that could be used to make statistics on SL usage and questions like 'who?', 'when?', 'why?' and 'what?' could be easily answered. All this information could be the base for selecting new material that could

eventually be more adequate to SL public and serve as an argument for changes in priorities and as a justification for a budget increase. Through these statistics it would probably be more feasible to measure SL impact as a whole on student learning, literacy, reading levels and access to information, similarly to what has been happening internationally (e.g. Lance, Rodney and Hamilton-Pennel (2000); Ireland (2001); Willians and Wavell (2002); Lonsdale (2003). Only at SL A9 some efforts on gathering information about 'who reads what?', were observed. In here, first years student girls are who make more book loans and magazines and newspapers are the most read resource. A very uncommon situation was found at L3, where, besides not being motivated to know which books are more read by students, it is asked to students to shelve the books they use. The following demand is written in each shelf: "*Don't forget from where you have taken the book, try to put it back again correctly*".

Having the whole collection on computer software it is still a left behind task by most SL because it has been very difficult to provide human resources in adequate number and available to devote time to this important task. Another additional drawback is the fact that the majority of SL has had their software changed when they were accepted in RBE, implying re-cataloguing and re-classifying of whatever was already done because most software programs are not compatible thus not allowing direct file imports.

Equipment

On the whole, SL have adequate equipment and technological infra-structures for their users. Both preliminary results from a study (Novo, 2006) and *in loco* observation, indicate that in all visited and studied SL there is a high number of computers, audio and video equipment and there are only a few that do not have a photocopier machine or a printer. All SL have access to the Internet and some have already intranet and a local network that allows being connected to other school services. This is important since the great majority of schools are in rural areas; student families have very low socio-cultural and economic level; students do not have great expectations for their future; few have a PC and almost any have a home internet connection. Therefore, access to any kind or sort of information is made almost exclusively at school through the SL and its resources available in several formats.

Having equipment and technological infrastructures available in most SL does not necessarily means that all is working and in good conditions: at least in three SL (N5, C4 and L9), it is already several months since the computers were working; access to the Internet is not available at two (N5, C10); there is neither a photocopier machine nor a printer at L9; audio and video equipment is not properly switched on at L11. Other SL have good TIC rooms (N3, A7); fully booked computers (C10) all day long; five to six students by work station (A6); ten computers, five with Internet connection, photocopier machine, printer and scanner (G3).

School Libraries activities' dynamism

It is usually the coordinator who is responsible for organizing and giving dynamism to the activities agreed between the SL team members, the school management board and the pedagogical board. The Annual Activities' Plan, signed by all, is approved at the beginning of each new academic year. These Plans can be more or less sophisticated, more or less ambitious, but usually several days and personalities are commemorated throughout the year.

The observation period had coincided with the ISLD and Christmas preparations. It was possible to see several degrees of team members' involvement, including library assistants, teachers and students, Parents Group, the City Council and the school community, in a wide spectrum of SL activities. In six SL there were activities going on and eight were preparing

future events. Of all these activities, the following are mentioned due to their degree of involvement and impact on the whole school community:

- At N1, teachers, students and the Parents Group organize and participate in several SL events and have the Public Library as a partner for the loan of their space where the end of academic year theatre takes place. The play is written by teachers and students, who are also the performers;
- At N3, the coordinator yearly organizes a book fair. This year she has managed to have thirteen publishers and she turns this fair into a social and cultural event for the whole educational community;
- At C3, ISLD was taking place and students have made book marks, balloons were set free, carrying related SL phrases, some students read texts and poems and a Diploma was given to the best reader.
- At C4, there were commemorations of Saint Martin (11th November) which was the starting point for research on the Internet, proverbs, cross words and other activities related to this 'legendary winter Saint who brings with him some Summer days'.
- At L11, and due to the large foreign community to which the school now belongs, the coordinator was going to organize, near Christmas and with the purpose of integrating the whole community, an event that would bring together Portuguese and foreign parents and students. This event would include showing and tasting food from five different countries.
- At G3, there were several activities going on concurrently, like raffles for a Christmas bag containing books, DVDs, CDs and an MP3, a Father Christmas text competition, exhibition of several Nativity scenes from different nationalities and an exhibition of Christmas cards made by students from all school year levels.

Conclusion

The general description of the twenty SL visited and observed in an average of 4 hours, is based on the field notes that were written while observing and after leaving the setting.

Direct non-participant observation revealed that the involvement and support of the school management board was the most significant factor for development or stagnation or even retrocession of SL in terms of their development, organization and activities dynamism. Nevertheless, SL with more students coming in, more developed activities, larger quantity of catalogued and classified collection, bigger number of computers running properly and better physical location and conditions, have in their teams members with specific training to perform library tasks, particularly when that member is the coordinator him/her self.

Students from Kindergarten and first school years are who use SL more often and have access to their information resources and really the ones who profit from its existence inside the school. Apparently, coordinators are not affected by the non-usage or participation of last year's students in any promoted and developed events.

The responsible teams for all these SL differ significantly from each other. The time they have been allocated to the SL and the specific training they might possess are the two stronger factors when observing their way of facing a big challenge, i.e. keeping the SL with 'the door open'.

The majority of SL observed are nice and well taken care physical spaces, with different quantity and quality of materials and equipment, which could be related to different degrees of usage also seen across them.

More 'positive' SL have coordinators seen as crucial elements for the educational process and they are even encourage to work with and involve the whole school community. These coordinators show initiative while promoting SL services and resources and pay special attention to activities centred on reading, literacy or adequate access to information, to captivate their target group.

Some deficiencies were detected, like the absence of statistical data. These data would characterize SL in terms of their clientele, usage of the entire collection, developed activities and autonomy and would also reveal areas needing intervention. This gathering of data would, ultimately, allow to measure and adjust the impact that SL might have on literacy, learning how to read, information research and selection capabilities on an autonomous and effective way. It was not observed in any SL the willingness to deliver programs or sessions on teaching how to locate and use information in any kind of support, both paper or digital.

It was also negative the fact that almost half of SL are closed during lunch time or breaks because this way students have no other chances of going there and having access to information resources.

Besides observation was done in twenty SL from the north to the south of Portugal and that each one of them can be considered a very specific reality, with both weak and strong points, there are common areas to all of them that need priority attention. Intervention from school management boards, education regional authorities and also from RBE is crucial for placing SL at schools' heart, allowing access to information, which is fundamental to achieve academic and educational success.

Some recommendations or suggestions

Schools through their management board would need to:

- Recognize SL and their coordinators as resources and crucial and precious elements for students to achieve educational success;
- Allocate adequate human, material and financial resources to SL for them to be able to perform their duties with efficacy;
- Invest in specific training for performing library duties on team members and ease them the access to courses and available training;
- Implement the gathering of statistical data routine, looking for all forms of evidence that could measure SL impact on students' learning;
- Develop programs or sessions related to information literacy and autonomous work to improve student learning progression;
- Allow school community to use SL premises while there are classes going on, breaks and lunch time, allocating enough human resources;
- Promoting the usage of SL by the whole school community, especially by last school years' students, all teaching, admin and auxiliary staff.

The ones responsible for the support and development of SL in schools, regional education authorities and RBE would need to:

- Work together with the school management board and SL team coordinators to put School Libraries on their top priorities' list to turn them into invaluable information providers.

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